



Early Christian Gold Class

Author(s): C. Louise Avery

Source: *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, Vol. 16, No. 8 (Aug., 1921), pp. 170-175

Published by: The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3254437>

Accessed: 14/08/2009 10:30

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=mma>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The Metropolitan Museum of Art is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

be found in Case E of the Fourth Room, and shows the graceful figure of a kalathiskos or Lakonian dancing-girl, with her high basket headdress and short, full chiton.

A pinax from the second half of the fifth century B.C. is placed in Case A of the Fifth Room. It is of unskilful workmanship, yet full of vivacity. It displays the back of a Seilenos with head in profile to the left and right arm raised.



FIG. 3. GODDESS

A pleasing little fragment which probably dates from Hellenistic times has been placed in Case B of the Seventh Room. Against the flat background a nude warrior in long-plumed helmet crouches behind his shield and brandishes a long sword.

From Nipidito, Crete, come two hand-carved bowls of dark stone, one of the Late Minoan I period, the other probably from the end of the Early Minoan period. They are placed in Case H of the First Room with similar examples from Crete. The larger and later of the two is of a dark purplish-brown color, and is shaped like a lotus flower with petals carved in low relief on the outer surface. The other bowl is of far ruder workmanship, and is

dark green. It has two knob handles, and is decorated with perpendicular cuttings on the outside of the lip.

M. E. C.

EARLY CHRISTIAN GOLD GLASS

THE early Christians in Rome buried their dead in subterranean galleries or catacombs, sometimes in burial chambers but more often in niches or loculi along the narrow corridors. It was customary after burial to seal the tomb and frequently there were impressed in the moist plaster or cement, fragments of gold glass which had originally formed the bottoms of drinking vessels. It has generally been thought that these pieces of decorated glass served as a means of identifying the tombs and that the glass vessels were not made for a funerary purpose but were in use by the deceased during lifetime. The latter conjecture is undoubtedly correct; the identification hypothesis is not so certain. Dr. Gustavus A. Eisen, in an article on antique glass published in *The Art Bulletin*, vol. II, no. II, suggests that the gold glasses with scenes of Christ and the saints "were regarded as protective amulets to the defunct and that the cups were placed in the cement in such manner as to be readily seen from the passages in the catacombs. They indicated to the living that the deceased was a Christian, and served as a warning to the evil spirits and influences, which were supposed to haunt these dark places, that the dead should not be disturbed because he rested in Christ. . . . There are no good reasons for assuming that these cups were used as communion chalices, nor that they served as identification marks by which relatives could recognize the graves of the members of their families or those of friends."

This early Christian gold glass has been studied by several noted archaeologists and there is a considerable literature on the subject. The most comprehensive discussion and the greatest number of illustrations are to be found in the two works by Garrucci: *Vetri Ornati di Figure in Oro* (1858) and *Storia della Arte Cristiana*, vol. III (1876). Vopel in 1899 published an

excellent summary, *Die Altchristlichen Goldgläser*, supplemented by a brief descriptive list of all the examples known to him. He records nearly five hundred early Christian pieces with forty-two additional examples of mediaeval or modern workmanship. Another notable contribution is Kisa's *Das Glas im Altertume* (1908). We shall have occasion in commenting upon the examples of gold glass in the Museum collection to refer to

parent glass so that the gold was protected on both sides by layers of glass. The crackling of the gold to be observed in work of this kind was caused by the difference in the rate of contraction and expansion of the gold and of the glass within which it was imprisoned. The average diameter of these fragmentary bottoms of vessels is between three and five inches. Only very rarely did the sides of the vessel receive decoration in gold.



FIG. 1. FRAGMENT OF GLASS EMBEDDED IN PLASTER. SAINTS PETER AND PAUL SEATED; CHRIST STANDING

the description of our pieces in these works.

A brief note on the technique of gold glass may precede our description of the pieces in the Museum. In the manufacture of this ware gold leaf was attached by some such adhesive as gum or honey to the bottom of a transparent glass vessel. The design was then produced by scratching the gold leaf with a needle. Color was sometimes but rarely used in conjunction with the gold. When the graffito work on the gold was completed it was protected by fusing over it a disk of trans-

The designs etched in the gold of this early Christian glass possess little or no artistic value but iconographically they are of great interest, affording some analogies to contemporary frescoes, mosaics, and sarcophagi and showing the increasing use of Christian subjects in the art of the period. While the examples date from the third to the fifth century or even later, the second half of the fourth century was the period of their greatest production. The earliest glasses, dating from the third and early fourth century, are generally decorated with pagan subjects as the Chris-

tians of that period were not averse to the use of such material so long as it was employed for the sake of ornament and did not imply worship. Many of these glasses, being designed for household use, represent scenes from every-day life or portraits of men, women, or family groups. Freedom from persecution and the increasing strength of the Church account for the prevalence of Christian subjects in the later examples of gold glass. The great majority of glasses are so decorated.

Both from the point of view of chron-



FIG. 2. BIBLICAL CYCLE ENCIRCLING A MEDALLION

ology and from that of the subjects illustrated, the Museum collection of fourteen examples of early Christian gold glass is quite representative. Twelve of these were purchased by the Museum at various times from 1911 to 1918. The Pierpont Morgan Collection, given to the Museum in 1917, contained two important examples of early glass and a third piece which is of particular interest because Garrucci has suggested that it is an eighteenth-century imitation made to deceive the antiquarian Ficoroni. The entire group is now exhibited in Gallery F 2 in the Pierpont Morgan Wing. Numerous imitations and forgeries of early Christian gold glass were made in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the corridor connecting Galleries J 10 and J 11, is exhibited a small group of gold glass made in Venice

in the nineteenth century in imitation of early Christian examples. Two of the pieces are conjectural restorations of the forms of the unbroken vessels.

The iconography of early Christian gold glass may well be reviewed by a brief description of the pieces in the Museum collection. Vopel, in recording all the examples of gold glass known to him, groups them according to subject, making his chief classes:

1. Glass bearing Greek or Latin inscriptions.
2. Glass with pagan subjects.
3. Glass with secular subjects, including genre scenes and portraits of men, women, and family groups.
4. Glass with Hebrew religious subjects.
5. Glass with subjects relating to the Christian religion, including Biblical subjects and those representing apostles and popular saints.

Nearly all of these divisions are illustrated by Museum examples. The earliest piece, a fragment of yellow, somewhat iridescent glass dating from the third century, belongs in Vopel's first group as it bears only an inscription: $\overline{\text{APBAK}}$
 $\overline{\text{T}} \mid \overline{\text{T}} \mid \overline{\text{E}}$, which Garrucci has translated, "Arbakti (probably a proper name of barbarian origin), drink!" ($\overline{\text{T}} \mid \overline{\text{E}}$ being a corruption of the Greek "Drink!"). It might possibly be a transposition of the Latin "Bibe in otio"—"Drink at your ease."¹

The majority of glasses decorated with secular subjects represent portraits and are generally inscribed with the names and with some form of greeting. Five such pieces are included in the Museum group. The bottom of a fourth-century bowl bears a bust portrait of a beardless man in the toga contabulata and the toast $\text{CVM TVIS PIE ZESES}$ ("Drink! Long life to thee with thine"), within a gold border.²

Occasionally the portrait is made the center of a series of scenes. A portrait

¹Acc. no. 16.174.1. Formerly in the Kircherian Museum, Rome. Pub.: Garrucci, *Vetri*, pl. XXXVIII, 1, p. 79; Vopel, no. 1, pp. 8, 20, 81.

²Acc. no. 18.145.5. Formerly in the Vatican Library. Pub.: Garrucci, *Vetri*, pl. XXVI, 3, p. 54; Storia, vol. III, pl. 195, 3, p. 177; Vopel, no. 84, pp. 8, 12, 43, 45, 80, 82ff.

bust, similar to the preceding, with the single word ZESSES ("Live!"), forms the central medallion of the base of another bowl in the Museum collection and is surrounded by a cycle of Biblical scenes: Christ with the rod of power protecting the three Israelites in the fiery furnace, healing the paralytic, changing the water into wine at Cana, and Tobias and the monstrous fish (fig. 2). Kisa and Vopel both attribute glasses with Biblical cycles to the second half of the fourth century.³

Many of these portraits represent a man and his wife. Fragments probably from the bottom of such a bowl show the half-length figure of a woman in richly embroidered mantle, necklace, and diadem. A curtain at the right is caught up in a knot; the background is strewn with floral medallions. Vopel attributes this fragment to the later part of the fourth century.⁴

The base of a fourth-century drinking vessel of greenish glass, the gift of J. Pierpont Morgan in 1917, represents a family group—man, wife, and son—in a room. From the inscription we learn that the man was named Bulculus, the wife Venerosa, and the son Omobone. The design is completed by the toast, "Drink! Live!" (PIE ZESSES).⁵

It is probable that the majority of these bowls were originally designed for various festivals, either domestic or religious. An excellent illustration is afforded by the base of a fourth-century bowl which was presumably used at a wedding-feast as it pictures a marriage or betrothal scene. At either side of a pillar, symbolic of the church, stand a beardless man in the toga

contabulata and a girl in tunic and richly embroidered mantle. Above are represented a gem and a laurel crown, the latter symbolizing the reward of conjugal fidelity. VIVATIS IN DEO ("Live in God") is the pious exhortation.⁶

Of glasses decorated with Hebrew subjects Vopel records but nine examples; the Museum is indeed fortunate in the possession of one of these rare fragments. The base of the original bowl was divided horizontally, the upper half containing various symbols of the Jewish cult: the Ark of



FIG. 3. SAINTS PETER AND PAUL BESIDE A SYMBOLIC PILLAR

the Covenant containing the rolls of the law and the prophets, two seven-branched candlesticks, the ram's horn, a circular cake perhaps representing the unleavened bread of the Passover, a roll, and palm branches. The lower portion of the base represents a banquet hall hung with garlands and furnished with a table on which is a fish in a basin. The inscription—*I BIBAS CVM EVLOGIA COKP* ("Drink with praise together")—and the subjects represented suggest that the bowl may have been used at a Jewish Passover feast and may have come from a Jewish catacomb. Kisa places glass with similar inscriptions

³Acc. no. 16.174.2. Found in the Cemetery of S. Callisto in 1715 and given to Pope Clement XI; at one time in the Kircherian Museum, Rome. Pub.: Garrucci, Vetri, pl. I, 1, p. 1; Storia, vol. III, pl. 171, 1, p. 115; Vopel, no. 85, pp. 16, 43, 44f., 68, 72f., 75f., 81.

⁴Acc. no. 18.145.7. Formerly in the Vatican Library. Pub.: Garrucci, Vetri, pl. XXXII, 6, p. 62; Storia, vol. III, pl. 200, 6, p. 186; Vopel, no. 146, pp. 10, 12, 44, 45.

⁵Acc. no. 17.190.493. Formerly in the Kircherian Museum. Pub.: Garrucci, Vetri, p. 61, pl. XXXII, no. 2; Vopel, p. 38, no. 105.

⁶Acc. no. 15.168. Pub.: M.M.A. Bulletin, vol. XI, p. 128; Garrucci, Vetri, pl. XXVI, 11; Storia, vol. III, pl. 195, 11, p. 178; Vopel, no. 138, pp. 8, 12f., 42f., 45f., 81, 83; Eisen, Antique Glass, in Art Bulletin, vol. II, p. 113, pl. X111.

in the second half of the fourth century.⁷ The curious fact that practically all of the glasses with Hebrew symbols were discovered in Christian catacombs Dalton attributes to the same tolerance which the early Christians showed in their use of pagan subjects. "Who made the glasses is another question; they may either have been produced in pagan workshops, or by Jewish artificers settled in Rome."⁸

Of the large group of glass with Biblical scenes or representations of apostles and saints the Museum has seven examples. An oval medallion of pale green glass with backing of cobalt blue shows the figure of Christ or of Moses clad in tunic or pallium and with the rod of power in his extended right hand. This example probably dates from the second half of the fourth century, as miracles are most frequently found represented in glass of that period.⁹

Figures of saints and apostles were appropriate subjects for the decoration of glass, whether designed for use at special feasts of the church or for family festivals. The Museum fragment of emerald green glass representing a bust of Saint Lawrence, the cross projecting above his shoulder, may perhaps have been made for the celebration of the Feast of Saint Lawrence in Rome. The inscription—ANE VIVAS IN CR LAVRENTIO—probably gives the end of a proper name and Vivas in Cristo (et in) Laurentio ("Live with Christ and Lawrence"). The form of the Sacred Monogram which is inscribed above the saint's head and the A and Q which also appear are attributed by Vopel to the later part of the fourth century.¹⁰

The most popular figures are those of

⁷Acc. no. 18.145.1. Formerly in the Biblioteca della Vallicella. Pub.: Garrucci, Vetri, pl. V, 3, p. 14; Storia, vol. VI, pl. 490, 3, p. 157; Vopel, no. 163, pp. 9, 11, 16.

⁸O. M. Dalton, *The Gilded Glasses of the Catacombs*, an excellent account based to a large degree upon Vopel's book and published in *The Archaeological Journal*, vol. LVIII, pp. 225-253.

⁹Acc. no. 18.145.8. Formerly in the Vatican Library. Pub.: Garrucci, Vetri, pl. VII, fig. 14, p. 23; Vopel, no. 279, pp. 8, 10, 64.

¹⁰Acc. no. 18.145.3. Pub.: Garrucci, Vetri, pl. XX, 1, p. 43; Storia, vol. III, pl. 189, 1, p. 162; Vopel, no. 404, pp. 12, 18, 23, 25, 53, 81, 85.

Saint Peter and Saint Paul who, in the earlier examples, are represented as young and beardless and are generally seated. In this manner they are pictured in a fragment of glass at the Museum, the base of a bowl which is still embedded in plaster and which may perhaps have been originally made for the Feast of Saint Peter and Saint Paul at Rome (fig. 1). The two saints are seated at either side of a smaller standing figure of Christ holding wreaths above their heads. The inscription—ELARES EN CRISTO DENGNETAS AMICOROM—is faulty Latin for hilares in Cristo, dignitas amicorum ("Joyful in Christ, worthy among thy friends"). This type is generally assigned to the middle of the fourth century.¹¹

The same saints appear beardless but instead of being seated are pictured standing at either side of a woman in tunic, stole, necklace, and diadem, representing either a saint or a Christian woman, as her name PEREGRINA is inscribed above. Authorities differ as to the date of this example, Vopel assigning it to the first half of the fourth century while others hold the opinion that standing figures of the apostles were made from the middle of the fourth century onward. The attitude of the female figure whose arms are outstretched as in prayer is interesting because of the analogies it presents with similar orants in contemporary frescoes. Such figures may have been portraits of the deceased or may have symbolized the soul.¹²

In the decoration of the base of a bowl of later date in the Museum Saint Peter and Saint Paul are portrayed as older men with beards and are clad in pallia (fig. 3). They are standing at either side of a jeweled pillar symbolizing the Church and surmounted by the Sacred Monogram in the form attributed by Garrucci to the late fourth or early fifth century. The names PETRVS and PAVLVS are inscribed beside the figures.¹³

¹¹Acc. no. 11.91.4. Pub.: *M.M.A. Bulletin*, vol. VI, p. 234.

¹²Acc. no. 18.145.2. Formerly in the Vatican Library. Pub.: Garrucci, Vetri, pl. XXI, 6, p. 49; Storia, vol. III, pl. 190, 6, p. 170; Vopel, no. 375, pp. 10, 13, 19, 50, 57, 85.

¹³Acc. no. 16.174.3.

PETRVS inscribed on another late fourth- or fifth-century example indicates that the busts of two bearded men there pictured represent Saint Peter and Saint Paul. This fragile iridescent glass probably came from the Gréau Collection and was given to the Museum by J. Pierpont Morgan.¹⁴

The base of another bowl is decorated with portrait busts of two beardless apostles or apostolic men in tunics and mantles, within an engrailed band and an outer border of half-ovals. Vopel describes similar types, attributing them to the second half of the fourth century, though Kisa assigns the beardless type to the period before the middle of that century.¹⁵

The last example to be described is a

¹⁴Acc. no. 17.194.357. Pub.: M.M.A. Bulletin, vol. VI, p. 235; Froehner, Collection Julien Gréau (1903), ch. XXII, p. 218, no. 1611(?).

¹⁵Acc. no. 18.145.6. Formerly in the Vatican Library. Pub.: Garrucci, Vetri, pl. XVI, 1, p. 37; Storia, vol. III, pl. 185, 1, p. 155; Vopel, no. 435, pp. 9, 12, 19, 54.

medallion representing bust portraits of a young woman and child in gilt on a dark ground and is framed in gilt with a border of conventional leaf forms in relief.¹⁶ Suspended by a chain about the child's neck is a bulla or ornamental pendant containing an amulet, of the sort worn by Roman children of noble birth to protect them against sickness and the evil eye. The antiquarian Ficoroni considered this portrait medallion a genuine example of ancient glass and published it in his study of the ancient bulla. Garrucci, however, raises the question of its authenticity by suggesting that it was made by a forger who knew Ficoroni's interest in the bulla. From the latter's collection it passed successively into the Walpole, Wentworth Dirke, and Pierpont Morgan collections.

C. L. A.

¹⁶Acc. no. 17.190.109. Pub.: Garrucci, Vetri, pl. XL, 9, p. 83; Ficoroni, La Bolla d'Oro (1732), p. 11; Walpole, Catalogue of Strawberry Hill (1842), p. 155, no. 70; Vopel, no. 528.

NOTES

SUMMER VISITORS. The summer is peculiarly the season of the out-of-town visitor to the Museum. During the month of July many different groups of summer visitors have taken advantage of Museum hospitality to see the collections accompanied by a Museum Instructor or by an other member of the staff. Among these special guests at the Museum have been students at the Summer Session of Columbia University, delegates to the Sixth World Convention of Christian Endeavor Societies, blind teachers of the blind who were accorded the unusual privilege of handling selected Museum objects, and young women from a colored branch of the Young Women's Christian Association. The groups of students from Columbia University under guidance of Leonidas E. Crawford came on July 7 and July 11 and were introduced in sections to

those collections in which each had peculiar interest. Paintings and the recent "finds" of the excavators of the Museum Egyptian Expedition proved especially popular. This was but a first glimpse of the objects and was intended to help the students to gain more from their later visits alone than they might otherwise.

THE STAFF. Miss C. Louise Avery, Assistant in the Department of Decorative Arts, has been appointed an Assistant Curator in the same department.

JULY ACCESSIONS. The gifts offered to the Museum since the last issue of the BULLETIN and accepted by the Trustees on July 18th, 1921, will be acknowledged in the September issue and shown in the Accessions Room at that time.